Planning for change: New directions to assure quality

The new federal government is well aware that quality early childhood provision has the potential to change children’s lives and position them for future social and educational success. Margaret Young, National President of Early Childhood Australia, has emphasised the importance of this commitment to quality programs for children and families. She stresses the need for working together to bring about a new era for early childhood education.

Since the election of the Rudd government, the pace of work in reviewing early childhood policy, structures and practice has been extraordinary. Election commitments are being followed through, and policy and decision-making groups are working with key stakeholders and experts to progress the agenda for change.

The main policy reforms underpinning the early childhood education and care election platform were threefold:
- 15 hours of preschool access for all four-year-olds for 40 weeks per year
- nationally streamlined and integrated licensing and accreditation standards, nested within a national quality standards framework
- a new early childhood learning framework.

The challenges in implementing these reforms are well recognised. For example, we need incentives to train new early childhood teachers, and to attract (and retain) experienced early childhood teachers, especially in remote, vulnerable and hard-to-staff communities.

Careful planning is needed to ensure educationally significant outcomes for all children. Given the closely linked nature of the early childhood agenda items and the quest for nationally consistent quality standards, conceptual planning cannot stand alone; the issues – such as workforce strategy, funding, resources and logistics, and implementation options and priorities – must be considered simultaneously. So it is encouraging to see that national planning for change, while progressing speedily, is also thoughtful and considered.

High on the list of necessities for all early childhood programs is catering for diversity and capitalising on difference while ensuring rich, educationally significant learning experiences and equitable outcomes for all children. The best outcomes will occur when families and communities share similar goals for young children’s development and learning, and are active in planning early childhood programs.

As the articles in this Every Child indicate, play is a central aspect of young children’s development and learning. A sharp focus on play is a good starting point for programming, especially if it draws on the abundant evidence of how play impacts on all aspects of the early childhood experience. Furthermore, by articulating the value of play to social and cognitive development we are helping to establish its important role in early childhood. We hope that the articles in this issue assist you in identifying the central role that early childhood play occupies, and that you will continue to articulate its importance in early childhood programming to parents and co-workers.

Anna Targowska’s article reminds us that early childhood practitioners need to reflect on their own understanding of the real value of play and organise their teaching in a more child-directed, unstructured way. Combining this imperative with learning experiences customised to build thinking, language and literacy skills – especially for children who miss out on rich language and problem-solving experiences at home – will be the key to narrowing learning gaps in the early years and successful transitions to school.

Under the spotlight in the coming months will be how we document children’s development and learning, and reporting on the outcomes. Capturing the essence of children’s learning in early childhood programs and then reporting them in meaningful ways to inform practice and policy and to keep families in the loop will also be increasingly important. Therefore a clear understanding of how play contributes to early learning outcomes is vital for all practitioners.

Maxine McKew, Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care, has highlighted that a smart government will roll out ‘innovative models that bring together a range of services that affect the future cognitive and social development of children’. This sort of thinking, vision, goodwill and commitment places us in a stronger position to move forward.

We must be ‘ambitious’, says Maxine McKew. An ambitious agenda means we will be working towards a quality evidence-driven early childhood education sector – one that acknowledges the crucial role of play – that will lead the world.

This is a time for celebration in the early childhood field. After a decade of expansion, increasing complexity, red tape, gaps and variable quality, we have a real opportunity for review and change. We must seize the moment, or else our opportunity will be squandered. And it will be a long time before there is another.

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